MILLENARIANISM CHIEFLY MEDIEVAL

Before talking about millenarianism it would seem sensible to say what one means by the word. Originally, of course, it was a theological term; it referred to the prophecy in the Book of Revelation, that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years before the Last Judgement. But in recent years it has become customary amongst anthropologists and sociologists, and to some extent amongst historians also, to use the word simply as a convenient label for a particular type of salvationism. That is how I too am using the word. It remains for me to indicate as best I can the kind of salvationism I have in mind.

The movements I propose to consider, though they differ widely from one another, yet have all certain features in common. The salvation they envisage is always imagined as

firstly, collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a group;

secondly, terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realised on this earth and not in some otherworldly paradise;

Thirdly, imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly;

and fourthly, total, in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present but perfection itself.

Millenarianism understood in this sense - a rather broad sense, but a precise one nevertheless - has played and is playing a great part in world history. But this paper is concerned only with certain episodes in the story. I propose first to glance at the fountainhead of European millenarianism - the messianic hope of the Jews; and then to glance at the beginnings of Christian millenarianism in the early church. After that I shall proceed to consider in ~~rather~~ more detail some major types of millenarianism in medieval Europe. I shall also comment briefly on what seems to me to be the sociological significance of those movements.

Historically, the first millenarians were the Jews; the Jewish expectation of a messianic age is a form of millenarianism. ~~The last book of the Old Testament~~ in the Old Testament, the Book of Daniel, was composed around 165 B.C., when the Jews in Palestine were fighting to emancipate themselves from the Greek empire; that was the episode known to history as the Maccabeean revolt. Now Chapter VII of the Book of Daniel is in effect a millenarian manifesto; it describes, in a sort of code, how Israel will overthrow the Greek empire and thereafter rule over the whole world for ever and ever. A hundred years later Palestine was annexed to the Roman empire; and for the next hundred years the Jews produced a whole series of militant apocalypses directed against their new masters. For instance, the Apocalypse of Baruch, which belongs in the main to the first century after Christ, tells how a Jewish messiah will shortly arise, will break the power of Rome, will exterminate all nations that have ever ruled over Israel, and finally will establish a kingdom which will last until the end of the world. And that kingdom is to be perfect in every way. Pain, disease, untimely death, violence and strife, want and hunger will be unknown. The fruits of the earth will increase ten-thousandfold.

When the Romans, by suppressing the rising of 131 A.D., put an end to the political nationality of the Jews, they also put an end to Jewish millenarianism. Although in later centuries a number of self-styled messiahs arose among the dispersed communities, what they offered was mainly a reconstitution of the national home. But meanwhile there had emerged out of Jewish religion a new religion, Christianity; and Christianity took over the millenarian hope. What Jesus himself meant when he talked of the coming of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, has of course been much debated; and I shall certainly not enter into the debate. On the other hand there is no doubt about what the coming kingdom meant to many early Christians, from the first to the fourth centuries. The writings of such eminent Fatherd of the Church as Papias, Irenaeus and Lactantius show absolutely clearly what they were expecting: a dispensation in which the earth would, without cultivation, produce unheard-of abundance of wine and corn and milk. Moreover, the Christians were to rule over the rest of mankind: the heathen were to be handed over to servitude under the faithful. All this is to be found in writings of the early fathers, and it is absolutely indistinguishable from the fantasies in the Jewish apocalypses which had preced them.

However, the day came when Millenarianism was ousted from the official doctrine of the Church. It flourished only so long as Christians were an unpopular minority, frequently persecuted, constantly threatened with persecution. By the fourth century this situation had altogether ceased. By then Christianity was supreme in the Mediterranean world and was the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Church set about eradicating millenarian beliefs, and thereafter little is heard of them for many centuries. Then suddenly they reappear, in the Europe of the later middle ages. But this new millenarianism is very different from the old - different in its ideological formulation, different also in its social context. The new form of millenarianism is known to historians as Joachimism; and it became important as a protest against the growing wealth and worldliness of the Church.

The way of life of the upper clergy had indeed been much changed by the great economic revival which had been gathering momentum through the twelfth century. After centuries when economic activity had been very restricted, trade suddenly revived and money began to circulate in much greater quantities. Popes, bishops, abbots all felt the consequences. The papacy developed a vast system of taxation, and this in turn enabled it to behave in many ways like a great secular monarchy: popes not only maintained splendid courts, they also hired armies and fought battles. Bishops built themselves palaces where they lived in the same splendid style as other great feudal lords.

Many monasteries, even, became luxurious establishments. Joachimism developed as a protest against this state of affairs.

The man after whom this movement was named, Joachim, abbot of Fiore in Calabria, was not consciously unorthodox. On the contrary, he never would have set down his ideas in writing at all but for the fact that three popes in succession asked him to do so; and on his death-bed he explicitly submitted all his writings to the Holy See. And nevertheless in the whole of the middle ages there was scarcely another thinker who did so much to shake the structure of orthodox medieval theology, and there were few whose influence proved so damaging to the Church of Rome.

Towards the end of the twelfth century Joachim received a number of mystical illuminations, which guided him towards what he believed to be a hidden meaning in the Scriptures. Moreover he was convinced that this hidden meaning, as it was gradually revealed to him, provided the key to the future development of history. On the basis of his interpretation of the Old and New Testaments Joachim elaborated an interpretation of history as an ascent through three ages, each reflecting one of the Persons of the Trinity. The three ages overlap with one another and emerge from one another, thus embodying the mystery of the Son and the Spirit proceeding from the Father. The first age, reflecting the Father, was initiated by Adam; it was the age of married people. The second age, reflecting the Son, began with Isaiah, in the days of King Ozias; it was the age of clerics. But Joachim's interest is concentrated above all on the third age, reflecting the Spirit. This third age began to emerge already in the age of the Father, with the appearance of Elisha; it unfolded further in the age of the Son, with the appearance of St.Benedict; and it is to complete its unfolding in the near future. As the first age was the age of the married, and the second was the age of the clerics, so this third age will be the age of spiritual monks, of whom the Benedictines are the precursors. Moreover, the third age will be the final age, leading to the end of the world and the Last Judgement.

The values embodied in this millenarian vision are very different from those which had once found expression in Jewish [and early Christian] apocalyptic. In Joachim's Millennium physical ease plays no part; there is no talk here of an escape from pain and disease, or of an abundance of corn and wine and milk. The Spiritual monks represent the absolute triumph of the

spirit over the flesh, they are contemplatives rapt in mystical ecstasy, wholly indifferent to the things of this world. In their spirituality they are as far superior to their predecessors, the Benedictines , as Christ was to the prophets. And through their spirituality they will transform the world. With great eloquence Joachim indicates the differences between the three ages. The first age was passed in slavish servitude, the second in filial submission, but the third age will be the age of liberty. The first age was the age of fear, the second was the age of faith, but in the third age love alone will reign.

What impressed the men of the thirteenth century was, above all, Joachim's account of how and when the world was to undergo its final transformation. Joachim computed the duration of the second age as 42 generations, each lasting thirty years, from the birth of Christ; this meant that the third age must emerge from its period of incubation and attain full development between 1200 and 1260. There would be a time of great tribulation; ~~culminating in the appearance of Antichrist, as a tyrannical and persecuting monarch.~~ but At the same time, spiritual understanding would increase, until ~~and~~ finally ~~Christ would reappear and overthrow Antichrist. Then~~ the third age would come in its fulness.

In all this there were explosive potentialities. How explosive, emerged when Joachim's doctrine became associated with the religious cult of absolute poverty.

St Francis and his first followers, in the early years of the thirteenth century, had practised absolute poverty, refusing to own anything whatsoever. Later, when that humble confraternity turned into a great order, it made concessions to the demands of everyday reality and acquired very substantial property. But some Franciscans refused to accept the change and clung to the old ideal of absolute poverty. These were the Franciscan Spirituals. At first they simply represented one tendency within the Franciscan order; but by the 1270's they formed a faction which was openly at loggerheads with the superiors of the order. Early in the fourteenth century the Spirituals went further and broke first with the Franciscan order and then with the Church of Rome itself. Through their rigid adherence to the original ideals of St Francis,

the Spirituals in the south of France and in Italy found themselves in the position of heretics.

Amongst these Spirituals, Joachimite ideas flourished mightily. However, these were no longer the ideas of Joachim himself but of other writers, who took over his prophecy of the coming age of the Spirit, but also simplified it and gave it a twist that would have horrified Joachim. Joachim never attacked the Church of Rome or suggested that it was to be superseded; in his prophecies, the Church is to continue throughout the third age, only purified and spiritualised. The pseudo-Joachimite prophecies current amongst the Spirituals offer a very different prospect. In them, the Church of Rome is damned for its worldliness; it is to disappear, and to be replaced by the Spirituals themselves. They, and they alone, will lead mankind into the glories of the age of the spirit. A Spiritual will mount the papal throne as papa angelica, the angel-pope. And all this will happen in the immediate future. The fact that Joachim's own terminus ad quem, the year 1260, had long passed, made no difference; the date was simply postponed again and again.

Inevitably the Spirituals were condemned by the Church and persecuted accordingly; four were burned at Marseilles in 1318, and there were many more executions to follow. Equally inevitably, this persecution in turn increased the fury of the Spirituals against the Church. They came to see the Church as the Whore of Babylon and the Pope as Antichrist; they looked forward to the day when all the clergy would be massacred by the Emperor, that is, the German king.

It was a furious confrontation between a mighty, established institution and small groups of radical dissenters. And yet it was not a case of class conflict. The Spirituals were not - as has sometimes been suggested - poor peasants or artisans, protesting against a socio-economic system that was exploiting them. Originally, they were Franciscan friars; and later, when this ceased to be the case, they were drawn from townfolk of all kinds and not simply, or even mainly, from the poor. When these people condemned the wealth and worldliness of papacy and Church they were protesting not against economic exploitation but against the defection of spiritual authority.

Here we are confronted with a social factor of the utmost importance, and one which must be borne constantly in mind if one is to understand the heretical sects of the later middle ages. In the medieval world the Church stood as the divinely ordained authority which with its prescriptions and demands embraced the life of every Christian. And it was the one institution which, through its sacraments, could offer hope of salvation after death. But in the eyes of medieval people the surest sign of grace was asceticism - and the existing Church had about it much that was manifestly unascetic. Was it possible, then, that the Church had lost its spiritual validity, had ceased to be a vehicle of divine grace? The very thought, the very possibility of doubt about so vital a matter, was bound to engender intolerable anxieties. It was in response to these anxieties that sectarians of all kinds - Cathars, Waldensians, Spirituals - elaborated their various creeds. In the case of the Spirituals, the response took the form of a millenarian fantasy.

In the view of the Spirituals, the authority which had been forfeited by the existing Church was to pass to a new, poverty-loving church of the third and last age, represented by themselves. And as in all millenarian fantasies, the imperfect existing order was to be replaced not by one less imperfect but by perfection itself. The age of the Spirit was to be an age of supernatural bliss and harmony; while the Spirituals themselves were, in their own eyes, almost supernatural beings, endowed with a divine insight such as had hitherto been enjoyed only by Christ himself.

It is time to consider another form of millenarianism, which appeared towards the close of the middle ages, and which was revolutionary in the modern sense of the word. In part, it was derived from a very ancient idea. Already in Antiquity it was a commonplace that once upon a time, long, long ago, human beings had lived in a state of total equality and community, holding all things in common and knowing nothing of 'Mine' or 'Thine'. This idea was taken over by the Catholic Church. The Fathers, like the pagan writers, held that this total equality was the original intention of God; and from them the idea passed to the theologians of the Middle Ages. But all this was a matter of theory only. It was certain heretical preachers who, towards the end of the fourteenth century, were the first to try to call this egalitarian state of nature out of the depths of the past and present it as an attainable

ideal. And in doing so they provided the basis for a new, revolutionary form of millenarianism . From then on, the Millennium could be pictured as a re-creation of that lost golden age where social classes and private property were unknown. The close of the middle ages were accompanied by great social upheavals. These upheavals were not caused by any millenarian idea - far from it - but it is a fact that while they were taking place there also appeared various extremist groups which really were convinced that at any moment an egalitarian, communistic Millennium would be established by the direct intervention of God.

This would appear to have been the case already with John Ball and his followers in the English peasants' revolt in 1381. Admittedly, that is not the usual view - but it does seem to me to be justified if once one looks closely enough at the sermon which Ball is said to have preached to the rebel host, - that famous sermon on the text "When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then a gentleman?" As is well known, that sermon calls on the common people to cast off their yoke and seize the freedom they have always longed for. What has not been generally noticed is the scriptural reference on which this appeal is based. Ball bids the people be of good heart and conduct themselves like the wise husbandman in the Scriptures who gathered the wheat into his barn, but uprooted and burnt the tares which had almost choked the good grain; for harvest-time had come. The tares, says Ball, are the great lords, the judges and the lawyers. All these must be exterminated; then all men will enjoy equal freedom, rank and power.

To appreciate the full significance of this appeal, however, one must recall the scriptural context of the parable of the wheat and the tares. In Matthew 13 Christ interprets the parable to the Disciples, and he does so in the following words:

"He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.

"As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who has ears to hear, let him hear."

The parable of the wheat and the tares, then, is a prophecy concerning the last days and the Second Coming. And by proclaiming that this prophecy is now on the point of fulfilment Ball is in effect summoning the common people, identified with the children of the kingdom, to carry out that annihilation of the demonic powers which was to usher in the messianic reign of Christ on earth.

John Ball, then, must have been a millenarianist; but his version of the Millennium was to be a restoration of the lost golden age in which all things had been held in common by all people. In this he was the first of a whole series of revolutionary preachers who arose in various parts of Europe. We find such people, for instance, in the great Hussite revolution which broke out in Bohemia in 1419. Here the chief preacher was one Martinek Húska. What this man preached to his followers was that as "avenging angels of God and warriors of Christ" they must exterminate all sinners, whom he identified with the nobles and the rich. When this task had been thoroughly performed, Christ would descend from heaven and establish his millennial kingdom with its centre in Bohemia. And in that kingdom all things would be held in common. In preparation for this event the extremists among the Hussites actually set up a system of total community of goods in the territories which they dominated. Moreover they planned to impose this system on the whole world. "All people", they said, "must always hold everything in common, and nobody must possess anything of his own; whoever owns private property commits a mortal sin." They were resolved to extirpate that sin. They declared themselves to be "an army sent through all the world to carry the plagues of vengeance ... and judgement upon every people that shall resist them" - and after that "the Sons of God shall tread on the necks of kings and all realms under heaven shall be given unto them". In the event other revolutionaries of a more practical cast of mind soon deprived these extremists of all power. During the years of warfare that followed, while the Bohemian Hussites repulsed in battle after battle the invading Catholic armies, no more was heard of communal ownership.

It was about a hundred years after these Bohemian upheavals that Germany witnessed two outbreaks of communistic millenarianism which have remained celebrated right down to the present day. The first of these occurred during the peasants' war of 1525. On that occasion a former priest named Thomas Müntzer built up a revolutionary organisation which he called the league of the elect. This body, which had several hundred members, seems to have consisted mainly of urban unemployed and of

workers in the copper-mines. Müntzer himself was a fanatical millenarianist who lived in constant, tense expectation of the Second Coming. And he, too, expected the Second Coming to restore the lost primal state of total equality and community. Moreover he was convinced that the Second Coming would take place only when all the rich and the nobles had been killed. It was for this purpose that he trained and indoctrinated his so-called league of the elect. In reality the intervention of this body in the peasants' war was brief and futile. It operated only for a couple of days and only in one area, Thuringia; and all it achieved was to ensure that the crushing of the Thuringian peasantry was an even bloodier business than it would have been otherwise.

Müntzer was executed, but he found successors on the extreme left wing of the widespread religious movement which we know as Anabaptism. A couple of years after his death a friend of his, a bookbinder called Hans Hut, was preaching a communistic millenarianism in the towns of South Germany, until he too was captured and killed. More important were the happenings in the Westphalian city of Münster in the years 1534 - 35. Here a group of radical Anabaptists succeeded in setting up a theocratic regime which was characterised by a fairly complete community of goods. What enabled them to do this was the existence in nearby Holland and Frisia of a large proletariat which was living in a state of perpetual insecurity. These people streamed into Münster and soon dominated the town.

Besieged by a coalition of the neighbouring towns and principalities, the communistic New Jerusalem at Münster held out through incredible hardships. And in fact it never did surrender - after a part of the population had starved to death the town was stormed and all the surviving males were massacred. What gave these people the strength to endure so much was the doctrine which had been taught them by their leaders, Jan Matthys and Jan Bockelson. And the purport of that doctrine was, yet again, that Christ was about to reappear on earth and to put himself at the head of the faithful of Münster. Then he and his army would kill all the great and establish community of goods throughout the world.

In these late millenarian movements of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there is a social radicalism that had not existed in the millenarian movements of earlier centuries.

For this reason they have sometimes been interpreted as expressions of a widespread popular craving for a totally egalitarian, quasi-communistic order. By way of concluding this lecture I propose now to consider just how far this claim is justified.

One thing at least is clear: when a millenarian group of this kind emerged into daylight, it was always because some great revolt or revolution was in progress. This was the case every time. For instance, John Ball and his followers operated in the context of the English peasants' revolt of 1381; the Bohemian extremists operated during the early stages of the Hussite revolution; Thomas Müntzer and his 'league of the elect' made their brief appearance during the German peasants' revolt of 1525. The same can even be said of the radical Anabaptists of Münster. For before they established their New Jerusalem, there had been a whole series of revolts, not only in Münster but throughout the ecclesiastical states of north-west Germany. That much is generally recognized. What is not generally recognised is how little these extremist groups had in common with the mass risings to which they attached themselves and which they tried to exploit. Yet the contrast leaps to the eye as soon as one considers what kind of objectives these mass movements set themselves.

Let us glance at them one by one. What were the objectives of the English peasants in 1381? Seeing new possibilities opened up by the labour shortage caused by the Black Death, they were out to get manorial dues commuted to cash rents and villeinage replaced by wage labour. They were also protesting against increases in personal taxation, caused by the ruinous wars in France. What were the objectives of the Hussites? They were concerned to expropriate the Church in Bohemia (and incidentally the German aliens who governed that Church) and also to increase the status and independence of the laity as against the clergy. As for the German peasants in 1525, they were a rising and relatively prosperous class, but they were threatened by the rise of the new territorial states. Their aim was to defend their traditional rights against encroachments by those states, and also where possible to strengthen the autonomy of their traditional communities. And if we turn to the ecclesiastical states of north-west Germany we find that the powerful and wealthy guilds in the capital cities were striving forcefully to

restrict the economic privileges and immunities of the local clergy.

Now, though these aims were not in fact realized, they were at least precise, concrete, practical. The picture presented by the millenarian groups, on the other hand, is quite different. In each case, their aims were determined not by the objective social situation but by the salvationist fantasies of a handful of free-lance preachers. And those aims were correspondingly boundless.

For what these preachers offered to their followers was not simply a chance to improve their material lot - it was also, and above all, the prospect of carrying out a divinely ordained mission of stupendous, unique importance. On the strength of supernatural revelations, the social conflict of the moment was presented as different in kind from all other struggles known to history, a catalysm from which the world was to emerge totally transformed and redeemed. A group fighting such a battle under a divinely inspired leader inevitably regarded itself as an elite set infinitely above the rest of mankind, infallible and above all laws.

And this was indeed the case. Though their ideology was thoroughly egalitarian, in their emotional attitudes these revolutionary groups were extremely elitist. They were just as elitist as those Franciscan Spirituals who saw themselves as the only true harbingers of the age of the Spirit; or as those early Christians who expected all the heathen to be handed over to them as slaves. Moreover, whereas the early Christians and the Franciscan Spirituals left it to God to purify the world in preparation for the Millennium, these later groups felt called upon to do the job themselves, by exterminating all sinners. They also commonly showed themselves as far more bloodthirsty than the larger insurrectionary movements to which they attached themselves.

Again and again the same spectacle presents itself - a band of a few hundred dedicated enthusiasts struggling to master, in the interests of its own apocalyptic fantasy, a vast popular movement numbering tens or hundreds of thousands. And it wasn't simply in its aims and aspirations that the millenarian group differed from the mass movement around it - all the available evidence goes to show that it differed also in social

composition. In the first place, the prophet himself: normally he wasn't a manual worker or even a former manual worker, but an intellectual or half-intellectual. Ball, Hauska and Müntzer were all former priests turned free-lance preachers; while of Müntzer it is known that he was born to modest comfort and was a graduate with a voracious appetite for books. Of the prophets at Münster, Matthys was indeed a master-baker, but Bockelson was the illegitimate son of a village mayor, literate, and a failed cloth-merchant; while their manifestos were composed for them by Rothmann, another former priest. There is nothing here to remind one of the peasants and artisans who led the great popular risings. On the other hand one is reminded, and strongly, of the men who had led millenarian groups in earlier centuries - and who had never concerned themselves with class struggles at all. And indeed wherever the career of one of these men can be traced, it turns out that he had been obsessed by apocalyptic fantasies for many years before it occurred to him, in the midst of some great social upheaval, to address himself to the poor as possible followers.

But what of the followers? They did indeed come from the poor, - but, it would seem, from a very special kind of poor. It is most significant that all these movements flourished in areas where there existed a population which had no institutionalised means of defending or furthering its interests.

I should like to stress that that was not the normal situation of the medieval poor. A settled peasant or a skilled artisan might well be poor, but he was seldom defenceless. The manorial regime which determined the lives of settled peasants was by no means a system of uncontrolled exploitation. The custom of the manor which bound the peasants also bound their lord. Moreover, village groups were tough, efficient organizations, very skilled in defending traditional rights and even, if the opportunity offered, in extending them. And in the towns there were artisan guilds; these were formidable bodies, well able to cope with an obstinate overlord or a greedy patriciate. So settled peasants and skilled artisans did not normally find themselves in helplessly exposed situations. However, such people did not form the lowest strata of medieval society. Precisely in the most populous and economically advanced areas of Europe there existed numbers of poor folk who had no organization behind them. In the countryside there were landless peasants and farm hands. In the towns there were journeymen and unskilled workers. Everywhere there was a

whole floating population of beggars and unemployed. It was people such as these that provided the revolutionary prophets with their following.

I see no reason to believe that there existed then, any more than at any time before or since, any widespread desire to abolish private property or to establish a totally egalitarian order. But in a society where all norms were being swept away, where social tensions were mounting, where nationwide revolts were breaking out now here, now there - in such a society the age-old millenarian fantasies could easily be transformed into quasi-communistic ideologies. And in such a society millenarian sects could easily take the form of conspiratorial leagues, struggling to turn each new revolt into the final, world-wide, world-shattering, world-transforming cataclysm. In this sense, I believe, one may truly say that these last millenarian groups of the middle ages stand at the threshold of the modern world, and that their story illumines some of the upheavals of our own turbulent century.